

Mulcair says NDP will bring national child care program ^[1]

Author: Thompson, Catherine

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EXCERPTS

The federal New Democrats would bring in a national child care program to increase the number of affordable child care spaces across the country, said NDP Leader Tom Mulcair on a visit Thursday to Waterloo.

Mulcair toured the Emmanuel at Brighton Child Care Centre with Kitchener-Waterloo MPP Catherine Fife, a provincial New Democrat. Mulcair said the Waterloo visit is the second stop in what will be a cross-country consultation on child care in advance of unveiling a policy on child care this fall.

"The NDP believes that a national child care program is something that we can work out with the provinces and territories, provide the funding, make it a priority and actually get it done instead of talking about it as we've been doing for the past 30 years," Mulcair said at a news conference after the tour.

The federal Liberals failed to address child care during 13 years of government, and the Harper Conservatives in 2006 promised 125,000 daycare places but never delivered, said the leader of the official Opposition. But the child care policy would be a key plank in the NDP's 2015 election campaign, Mulcair said.

Parents whose children attend the Emmanuel centre said the hunt for quality, affordable child care can be a nightmare.

Heather Stuart, a mother of three, said when she moved to the region she thought she could simply sign her kids up for child care "and everything would be hunky-dory." But she soon learned from a neighbour that if she hoped to get her kids into Emmanuel, she would need to line up the day before the actual registration.

She ending up camping outside the daycare overnight in February to get a spot.

"It was a real eye-opener, in terms of what you need to do," she told Mulcair.

The system has since changed so that no one needs to camp out overnight - names go on a central waiting list, said Emmanuel supervisor Bonnie Zehr. But more than 300 names are on that list, and the daycare typically takes in no more than 50 new children each year, she said.

And the cost of care at the centre has jumped significantly in recent years, Zehr said, since the province introduced all-day kindergarten. School boards generally pay better wages than most daycares can afford, forcing daycare centres to increase their wages, and therefore their fees. At Emmanuel at Brighton, full-time daycare costs \$1,016 a month; part-time costs \$57 a day.

Those better school board wages also mean school boards can siphon off the top students in early childhood education programs, said Andrea Stirling, who teaches early childhood education at Conestoga College and whose child attends Emmanuel.

Daycare fees can cost about as much as university tuition, Stirling told Mulcair.

The experience in Quebec, where subsidized daycare is widely available for \$7 a day, shows that providing affordable daycare makes economic sense, Mulcair said. A study by reputable economists showed that every dollar invested in daycare in Quebec puts about \$1.75 back into the economy, he said.

Although child care is primarily a provincial responsibility, Mulcair says the federal government can play a role, similar to the role it plays in setting priorities in health care, another area that falls within provincial jurisdiction.

The details of the NDP policy are still to be worked out, he said, but he says it would be a flexible system that would include federal funding, reallocated from within the existing federal budget.

"It's not one size fits all even within the provinces," Mulcair told parents and staff at the daycare centre. "But we do understand that if we don't make it a national priority to start putting in place a system, then it's never going to get done. It's going to be a key part of our campaign and it's going to be based on working with the provinces and territories."

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